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A federal grant will launch a countywide reading initiative to help Latino parents learn English so they can help their children with homework and other skills.

U.S. Representative Mark Kirk, a Republican from Highland Park, announced the \$248,000 grant for Families Involved in Reading Stories Together.

It is designed to expand an existing program - now funded by the secretary of state's office - at libraries in Round Lake, Waukegan and Zion.

During Monday's presentation at College of Lake County, Kirk said he hopes the program will spur higher Latino graduation rates. He said members of a Student Latino Advisory Board told him that parents not being able to help with homework was a factor in kids dropping out of school.

"The No. 1 reason Latinos couldn't finish high school was that mom and dad couldn't do the homework with them in English," he said.

The federal grant will allow the program to offer more classes at the three existing libraries and add new class locations. The program will be offered at CLC's Grayslake and Lakeshore campuses this fall, said Mary Charuhas, dean of CLC's adult and continuing education.

The goal is to focus on areas with high Hispanic populations, Charuhas said.

FIRST targets mothers of young children who wish to improve their English skills. While the moms take English as a Second Language classes, their young children participate in pre-school activities. The parents read to their children each week and the family participates in

a craft activity. Each family also receives a book to take home.

Round Lake resident Leticia Martinez has been attending the Round Lake Area Public Library program with her 4-year-old daughter, Maydeline Mendez, for the past two semesters. The class meets three days a week for two hours.

"It's a great program. I am interested in this for my kids. My oldest is in high school, and it's harder for the kids to communicate with me. They use more English than Spanish," Martinez said.

FIRST also includes parenting skills, and activities and instruction on how to use the library.

FIRST began in 1994 at the Round Lake library, on a limited basis, said Sari Oosta, CLC Family Literacy coordinator. Two years ago, with the help of the secretary of state's grant, the program was expanded.

Rosa Reyes Prosen, CLC board member and chairwoman of Kirk's Latino Advisory Board, said such a program would have helped her mother, the eldest of 14 children who discontinued her education to help her family.

"She didn't complete grade school and wasn't able to read or write," Reyes Prosen said. "While my mother wasn't able to be blessed with a program like this, I'm hopeful that there will be many who will be able to learn."